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AUTHOR Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Quality circles are part of the movement to provide workers with increased autonomy, responsibility, and authority. Key elements of quality circles are the characteristics of their members volunteer participation, regular meetings, training, problem identification, and solution implementation. The theoretical bases of quality circles include: McGregor's Theory Y (1960), a management style that incorporates employees into the management process; factors identified by Herzberg (1966) that enhance or detract from job satisfaction; and Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (1954). Five steps are essential to successful implementation: (1) understanding and commitment of top management; (2) active involvement of middle managers; (3) intensive training for all participants; (4) preparation of the organization for implementation; and (5) establishment of rules and procedures. Training is the key element. The four levels of people who need to receive training are management, facilitators, team leaders, and circle members. Training developers need to take into account several organizational and process considerations. The outcomes of quality circles include improved quality and productivity, a better-functioning organization, and role changes. This fact sheet includes a bibliography of resources, one of which is available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Quality Circles: Implications for Training.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 24.

by

Susan Imel

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult,
Career, and Vocational Education

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 24

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

QUALITY CIRCLES: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING

What Are Quality Circles?

Quality circles are a part of the growing quality of work life movement in which organizations and jobs within them are designed to provide workers increased autonomy, responsibility and authority. Quality circles are groups created for the purpose of identifying and solving work-related problems. The key elements in quality circles are as follows.

- **Members.** Quality circles are made up of individuals who are part of the normal organizational work crew and their supervisors.
- **Volunteer Participation.** Participation in quality circles is on a volunteer basis.
- **Regular Meetings.** Quality circles have regularly scheduled meetings.
- **Training.** Members of quality circles receive training in problem-solving and group process techniques.
- **Problem Identification.** Following training, circle members identify problems, decide which problems to address, and investigate and analyze causes of problems.
- **Solution Implementation.** Once problems are analyzed, circle members develop and implement solutions to them.

What Theoretical Bases Underlie Quality Circles?

Quality circles are one response to the larger, more complex social and cultural work movement of the past three decades in which workers have felt that their work is increasingly dehumanizing and that they are underutilized as human resources. The quality circle process is based on a philosophy that recognizes individual workers who desire to participate in decisions affecting their work.

According to Harshman (1982) three major elements make up the quality circle process. Each is described below with its underlying theoretical base.

- **Management Style.** In order for circles to grow and develop, management must view employees as more than labor resources or extensions of machines. McGregor's Theory Y (1960), a management style that views employees in a positive manner and incorporates them into the management process, is important in understanding appropriate management style for implementing quality circles.
- **Elements of Satisfying Work.** According to Herzberg (1966), there appear to be factors that enhance and detract from job satisfaction. Achievement, recognition, growth, and responsibility are possible enhancing factors. Quality circles are designed to provide opportunities for many of these factors, thus providing a motivational climate.
- **Satisfaction of Human Needs.** Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) recognizes that people have different kinds and levels of needs: physiological; security/safety; social/belonging; ego/self-esteem; and self-actualization. To the extent that jobs incorporate elements that satisfy some higher order human needs, they in turn have greater potential for motivating workers. Quality circles provide many opportunities to fulfill higher order human needs.

How Are Quality Circles Implemented?

There are five steps that are essential to successful implementation of quality circles:

1. Top management must understand and be committed to quality circles. If present, labor unions should be involved with top management in the decision to install quality circles in an organization.
2. Middle managers and supervisors should be actively involved in the process of circle formation, training, and operation.
3. Intensive training must be provided for all participants, including managers, technical specialists, supervisors, employees, and any advisors.
4. The organization needs to be prepared for quality circle installation so that it can effectively offer incentives for employees to participate, provide necessary technical expertise, implement circle proposals, and measure the impact of the process.
5. Rules and procedures for the quality circle process need to be established. These could cover such areas as circle formation, leader selection, and reporting procedures.

The quality circle process fits into the existing structure of the organization, and members of quality circles are members of the normal work team. If possible, the team leader for the circle is the immediate supervisor, but in the circle, the normal supervisor-employee hierarchy is adjusted to a problem-solving team structure. The only position added to the existing organizational structure is the quality circle facilitator, the staff person who coordinates the overall effort.

What Is Involved in Training for Quality Circles?

Training is the key element involved in moving quality circles from idea to reality and most of the existing models of quality circles are built around extensive training components.

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Who Is Trained?

Four levels of people in the system need to receive training in order for quality circles to be implemented.

- **Management.** Top executives need training so they can understand quality circles, make a decision about implementation, and become aware of the extent of commitment required from management if the process is implemented. Training for middle managers can range from a general orientation program on quality circles to training on specific skills to encourage and support the process.
- **Facilitators.** Since facilitators are the internal persons responsible for coordinating the quality circles process, they receive the most extensive training. A facilitator has to learn three things: (1) the elements of the quality circle process; (2) how to train others in many aspects of the quality circle process; and (3) how to manage the quality circle process in the larger system.
- **Team Leaders.** Quality circle team leaders need training in task skills and group process skills. As team leader, an individual will have such task responsibilities as directing the problem-solving process and administrative procedures. Group process responsibilities may include gatekeeping, consensus testing, encouraging, and compromising. Leader training modules address the various task and group process skills needed for effective leadership.
- **Circle Members.** Like team leaders, quality circle members need two types of skills—task skills and group process skills. Task training for members focuses primarily on problem-solving skills, including brainstorming, cause-and-effect analysis, developing an action plan, and charts and graphs. The human relations or group process skills are equally important. Examples of group process skills needed by quality circle members are listening, clarification, participation, team ownership, and the ability to deal openly with conflict.

What Are the Implications for Training?

The major implications for training in terms of who is trained and the content of that training are as follows:

- The quality circle process is one of the few in which training occurs at all levels of the organization.
- The training tends to be "bottom heavy" in the organization; that is, team leaders and circle members receive more training than executives and middle managers.
- The organization needs to consider the training needs of various levels and roles in the organization.
- The training plan should include task skills and group process skills.

What Are Considerations for Training?

In developing quality circle training certain things need to be considered:

- The type of organization and the target population
- The goals of the quality circle effort
- The stage of development of the quality circle process

From these considerations, it is clear that no single approach to training or curriculum is appropriate to or sufficient for the installation of quality circles in a given setting.

What Are the Outcomes of the Quality Circle Process and Training?

Outcomes of the quality circle process also have implications for quality circle training. Some examples of the outcomes of quality circles and their relationship to training are as follows:

- **Improved Quality and Productivity.** Most of the existing training is dedicated to these ends.
- **A Better Functioning Organization.** As a result of the quality circle process, more problems get solved, relationships improve, and so forth. Training can build toward these possibilities.
- **Role Changes.** Through quality circles, supervisors or team leaders become team builders, helpers, and trainers. Workers assume more responsibilities and use more of their potential on the job. Training should explore, analyze, and reinforce the skills needed for these new roles.

REFERENCES

This Overview is based on the following publication:

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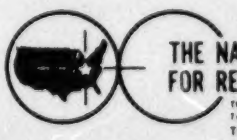
This Fact Sheet was developed by Susan Imel, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.



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